SILENT HILL 1

A New Vision of Horror

March 22, 1996, Capcom opens the champagne. The release of *Resident Evil* in Japan makes a big splash and its subsequent success in the West makes it one of the major titles of the PlayStation; a revolution which, on the basis of *Sweet Home* and *Alone in the Dark,* lays the foundations of *survival horror* and brings strong emotions that were never seen before.

Competitor Konami saw great opportunities. The studio intended to establish itself in the 3D field with original experiences that offered new ways to play. At that time, *Metal Gear Solid* had already been in production for a year, but the company needed to explore other areas. Several projects were circulating, the one that was finally chosen was a 3D adventure and horror game, which would follow in the footsteps of *Resident Evil,* in response to Capcom's game.

A core team of around fifteen people is then made up [1] and Keiichiro Toyama is placed at the helm of the project. He previously worked as a graphic designer on *Snatcher* and Konami's *International Track* & *Field . Silent Hill* is his first position as a creative director and, not without irony, he is not someone particularly attracted to horror in general. However, he is passionate about the occult and is a great admirer of David Lynch films. In addition, many members of the team are regular consumers of horror literature or horror cinema. They quickly come to determine the key points that will make the game a work apart.

Since Konami's intentions are to have a big success in the West, where the PlayStation asserts its omnipotence, it is decided to anchor *Silent Hill* in an American context, taking inspiration from the great names of horror literature. However, unlike *Resident Evil,* the desired approach is the search for another expression of terror, deeper and more instinctive.

An organic and collegial creative process

The project's anchor point quickly became Stephen King's novel The *Mist ,* for the context of the town trapped in fog and prey to supernatural creatures.
The fog offers the team a double advantage, that of a dreamlike and disturbing atmosphere (the impossibility of seeing beyond a few meters) in addition to a great technical help. Indeed, the main idea is to deploy the action of the game on the entire city, explorable at leisure for a unique impression of realism.

However, the technical capabilities of the PlayStation also do not allow for both great depth of field and free exploration in large

spaces. For lead programmer Akihiro Imamura, fog becomes the ideal solution to hide background graphics and limit loading without altering the visual rendering. The other technical point that becomes a central element of the game system and its atmosphere lies in the use of the flashlight. The creators agree on the threat that darkness represents and the obligation to use a flashlight seems to them to be a good immersive tool.

Keiichiro Toyama defines the broad outlines of the scenario by relying on the occult elements that he likes, but each member of the team brings their ideas, in particular Hiroyuki Owaku, who writes among others the enigmas Naoko[2] Sato, who is also one of the *designers* of the monsters and the graphic designer Masashi Tsuboyama.

Together, they design the characters and the story, based on the principle that the dark and mysterious parts will work the imagination and therefore the fear of the player. The main character, Harry Mason, is created as an ordinary person, relatively smooth, to allow the player to better identify with him and understand his reactions. Initially, he was to be called Humbert Mason, in reference to Humbert Humbert, the protagonist of *Lolita* (Vladimir Nabokov, 1955). Similarly, his daughter Cheryl was to be called Dolores, as in the novel. These names were changed because they were considered too unusual [3] –. It is also the cases of Alessa, whose first name was Asia, in a nod to Asia Argento, daughter of the famous Italian director Dario Argento *(Suspiria, Shivers of Anguish)* and Daria Nicolodi. In fact, the latter inspired the name Dahlia Gillespie. [4].

Artistic involvement

The true genius of *Silent Hill* will gradually take shape through the help of several artists with strong identities. For the appearance of the monsters, Naoko Sato and Masahiro Ito seek to get out of the familiar territory and opt for an organic approach. The creatures seem to have raw flesh and their appearance is inspired by the fears of the central character of the story, Alessa, to better develop the psychological dimension of the story and the adventure.

Takayoshi Sato's contribution is also essential. Newly arrived at Konami, he initially took care of the port of the arcade game *Sexy Parodius* to home consoles - Saturn and PlayStation. Comfortable with 3D, much more than most Konami employees at the time, he pushed the producers to give him a place within one of the projects under development. *Metal Gear Solid* requiring veterans, he was assigned to *Silent Hill,* initially to create demonstration videos and take care of small graphic details.

He quickly began giving 3D lessons to employees, most of whom were older than him. Within Konami, his young age was unfortunately considered a sign of inexperience, but Takayoshi Sato intended to prove his abilities. He made the first computer-generated cinematics of the game on his own, without help, and took the opportunity to determine the appearance of each character as well as their animation, the sets, the lighting effects, the framing, etc. He submitted his work to the production, which accepted it but

still considered assigning him a supervisor. Not considering that he needed one, and not wanting to be credited as "graphics assistant" even though he had done the work himself, Sato went for broke, as he would reveal to *Gamasutra* in 2005: "I had an argument with [my supervisor] who ended up asking me 'can you do it all by yourself?', to which I replied 'OK, I'll do it!' And that's how I ended up doing absolutely all the cutscenes without any help."

For nearly three years, Sato worked hard and almost never went home to sleep. At night, the offices were deserted and he took advantage of this to have access to the computers of other Konami employees, which made it easier for him to load the many data. The visual style he imposed through the cutscenes became a very strong source of inspiration for the rest of the project.

The Shadow of Resident Evil

Fully 3D games are still a novelty in the console world. Rather inexperienced in the field from a construction and game system point of view, the team in charge of *Silent Hill* must improvise a large part of the work 5 They decide to use a dynamic camera, which will be most of the time behind Harry in third-person view but which can, at specific moments, be placed on distant points with unexpected angles and movements to surprise and confuse the player, failing to facilitate movement. The handling is indeed inspired by that of *Resident Evil* with the direction inversions depending on the camera angle.

Capcom's game also serves as a source of inspiration for the menu, in which you can see the character's health (indexed according to three levels, green, orange and red) and access the inventory - here unlimited. The exploration based on keys to collect and twisted puzzles to solve is exacerbated, with however less back and forth necessary. On the other hand, due to the more numerous and larger places to explore, there are many inaccessible doors whose locks are broken. Maps of the city and areas make it easy to find your way around because they fill up automatically according to the player's exploration.

The fights themselves are designed like those of *Resident Evil,* with a button to aim and another to shoot or attack, with firearms or melee. It is however possible to move while shooting, and the enemies must be finished off once on the ground - you have to "crush" them to prevent them from getting up. Harry can heal himself with various objects, from the first aid kit to the ampoule. To stick to the video game spirit, the developers also include several bosses to punctuate the adventure.

The mechanics are thus undoubtedly reminiscent of Capcom's masterpiece, but the team behind *Silent Hill* uses this influence to its advantage, to better distinguish itself from it. The principle of multiple endings is notably taken up, but with variations that can surprise and change the view on the whole story 6 During development, several idea boxes are left at the disposal of employees, who can submit various suggestions depending on the subject. One of the boxes had the theme: "What are

Other possible reasons behind the supernatural manifestations of Silent Hill?
Several crazy answers are given. One of them, "it's the UFOs' fault", is used to create a crazy bonus ending, accessible only during a second playthrough, like the characters' "blooper reel" after [7]. A touch of typically Japanese humor that contrasts with the deep anxiety of the the end credits.

Musical anomaly

Finally, the final touch to the making of *Silent Hill* is due to Akira Yamaoka, composer and sound designer of the game. Present at Konami since 1993, this project seems to him as an exceptional opportunity to finally express himself fully. This psychological approach to horror and the principle of an entire city as a playground inspire him with innovative ideas. He wants at all costs to stand out from what has already been done in the genre and to go against all expectations by having fun with the player's perception. The industrial sounds and the ambient and rock influences are for him a way to give a unique identity to the music and sound effects of the series [8] The first time he plays his work to the team, one of the employees approaches the audio speakers to try to adjust them, believing that there is a malfunction. Akira Yamaoka is forced to explain his approach, which manages to convince them. The future would prove him right, of course, as it is recognized that a large part of *Silent Hill* 's identity rests on its extraordinary soundscape. In an interview with *RocketBaby* in 2001, in response to a question asking him how he became involved in the *Silent Hill project,* Yamaoka would answer: "It's the other way around. My sounds and my soul summoned *Silent Hill* into this world. I think our meeting was a product of destiny, because I am the only person in the world who can express the sounds of this game."

To compose the song *Esperándote,* played during the credits after the bad ending, Konami called on Rika Muranaka, a professional artist who, before working for the development studio, already had several albums distributed by Columbia Records to her credit. She also wrote the song "I Am the Wind" from *Castlevania : Symphony of the Night* (alongside Jeff Lorber), then the famous "The Best Is Yet to Come" from the first *Metal Gear Solid* [9] with the help of the Argentine singer. For *Silent Hill,* she chose a Spanish approach to her composition, Vanesa Quiroz.

The Beginnings of the Legend and Toyama's Departure

After being presented in the form of a playable demo provided with *Metal Gear Solid, Silent Hill* was released in 1999, first in the United States on January 31, then on March 4 in Japan and finally on August 1 in Europe. Before its release, the game went through a phase of censorship because of the Grey Children and the Larval Stalker. The first version of these creatures looked like naked children for one, and babies for the other. The rendering was considered too disturbing. The design of the Grey Children was modified three times before obtaining the approval of the commission of